

Initiating the new battlers

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Abstract

Peer mentoring, a collaborative program offered at University of Western Sydney, may enhance the educational outcomes and the first year experience of many first year university students. Learning Advisors, Counsellors and academics work together to train and support peer mentors from various Schools within the University. In training mentors, lecturing and content teaching is kept to a minimum. The group process, that is most used in the training of student peer mentors at UWS, is modelling of desired behaviours followed by opportunities for the trainee mentors to strengthen their skills by role rehearsal exercises in which mentors work towards facilitating cooperation, teamwork, joint responsibility and non-directive task oriented activity. This is followed by exercises that teach appropriate group facilitation techniques and finally by trainees preparing and running their own mentoring sessions. This paper discusses the processes and benefits of this program for the mentees as well as the mentors using the program conducted at UWS as an example. The paper also suggests that mentoring is a suitable strategy for improving the first year experience of international students beginning university in Australia.

Key Words: Peer mentoring, transition, integrated academic support programs, international students.

Introduction

Beginning university is a challenging experience for many first year students (McInnis & James, 1995; Tinto, 1995a). The challenges, which are multifaceted, include achieving academic success as well as managing emotional and social difficulties (McInnis, 2001). These challenges can be heightened for international students who additionally may face 'new' culture and academic structures, and sometimes may speak a different language (Cafarella, 1999).

Since the early 1980's there has been an awareness of the impact of the transition period of commencing tertiary students (Williams, 1982). However, in Australia, it was not until a federally funded study of first year students, "First Year on Campus" (McInnis & James, 1995) that a national benchmark was established that demonstrated the extent of the problems faced by first year students. Some of the trends that became evident in the study were that a considerable number of students studied in isolation, did not consider themselves prepared for university level study and many seriously considered withdrawing from university in their first semester of study (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000).

Research since then has provided increased understandings of the implications of the first year student experience and the extent of attrition among first year enrolments. It has also highlighted the assumptions that had been held surrounding an 'elite' educational experience, and indicated the need for universities to cater for population groups from differing backgrounds (McInnis, 2001). The first year at university continues to be a vulnerable period for a considerable number of students (Kantanis, 2000; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001) and one that has become a focus for Australian universities that have responded by introducing programs aimed at alleviating the stressors or difficulties of the first year experience (Calder, 2004; Peat, Dalziel & Grant, 2001).

This paper discusses the processes and benefits of peer mentoring as integrated support that is based on the principles of Supplemental Instruction (an American program developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas) for all students in the first year of their studies (Martin & Arendale, 1993). The paper uses the peer mentoring programs conducted at UWS (University of Western Sydney) as examples. It also suggests that these types of programs are highly appropriate for international students, especially those in their first year of studies in Australia. The purpose of the paper is to highlight the specific mechanisms by which peer mentoring can assist in the successful transition of students to university and to show the program's potential

to address the additional problems often faced by international students when entering a tertiary institution in an unfamiliar culture. Peer mentoring has benefits for mentees and mentors at the cognitive, affective and sociocultural levels, all of which are discussed later in this paper.

While all students stand to gain benefit from a peer mentoring program, international students have an opportunity to develop essential skills which may not have been considered important in their country of origin. Australian universities are renowned for their expectation of independent or autonomous learning (Marshall & Rowland, 1999). Common forms of assessment include the delivery of oral presentations and collaboration in class discussion; written assignments which may require control of several genres such as writing reports, analysing case studies and thesis writing. Both oral and written assessment tasks require evidence of research and critical thinking, moreover in the case of group tasks, students require to collaborate with other students. All of this may contrast with a home university culture which makes different demands on students. Studies have indicated that non- Australian students are more often than not reluctant to partake in discussions when in a large culturally mixed group (Wright & Lander, 2003). It is thus expected that a program that offers assistance in collaborative group settings with the presence of a facilitator would be of great benefit to international students. In addition to content directed learning, students have the chance to develop culturally specific metacognitive and social skills.

Peer Mentoring at UWS

The term Peer mentoring covers various forms of structured student interaction at university. As the term is used in this paper, it refers to organised groups where the experienced and trained students facilitate group interaction in relation to university study activities amongst small groups of less experienced students. The primary goal is to improve educational outcomes and student experiences of their education.

The Peer Mentoring program at UWS began in 1996 and is a multipronged program based on the principles underlying the successful American program of Supplemental Instructions (Martin & Arendale, 1993). The UWS program has been shown to be successful in the retention of first year students and improving grade point averages (Carmichael 2003a; Shrestha, 1999). The program takes a holistic approach to meeting the range of local and international students' academic, social and cultural needs. The program is coordinated and run by Learning Skills Unit and Counselling staff with some input from other interested academic staff.

This program adheres to the principles and procedures of SI, and is offered over a five week period usually for the first three weeks of semester and another two weeks close to the end of semester exam period. Mentors are selected for their high academic achievement in nominated subjects and for their good interpersonal skills. The first semester mentoring program is called the Acculturation Program. Trained peer mentors work with students in small groups to help facilitate the transition to university. This program meets the students' various immediate needs related to settling into university. Topics covered by mentors could include scheduling a study program, campus tours, features of a specialised computer program, effective study skills, etc. The second semester peer mentoring targets historically 'difficult' subjects which often have a high failure rate. The sessions are led by 'Learning Development Mentors' (Carmichael, 2003b) and have an emphasis on collaborative learning in a non threatening group setting to develop deeper levels of learning (Martin & Arendale, 1993) in first year students. The mentors are dissuaded from using any expert role such as that of the tutor or lecturer. Rather, they are encouraged to use a variety of techniques to promote discussion and learning within their group. Strategies to avoid the expert role may include asking mentees to work in small groups to identify the main points raised in a lecture. Small groups might then share their insights with a larger group. Activities likely to be included in these sessions are: deconstructing difficult readings, identifying main ideas from a lecture, summarising lecture notes, developing answers for practice exam questions, etc.

Both acculturation and learning development mentors receive the same training. This provides the trainers with flexibility in placing mentors in the program and maximises mentoring opportunities for mentors themselves. Trainee mentors are expected to attend a two day workshop provided by Learning Skills Unit and Counselling staff (Student Services) in collaboration. Training is conducted using techniques and strategies appropriate for mentoring sessions (Trainers' Manual, UWS, 2003). Much of the training centres around demonstration, exploration, modelling, practice and feedback. All activities are geared not only to

demonstrate the mentor role but also to enable the mentor role to emerge from a supportive educational environment.

The first day of training explores the philosophy of mentoring and the trainee mentors observe and participate in peer mentoring simulations. Modelling the process of mentoring during the two - day training program ensures that mentors have the experience of understanding and then rehearsing mentoring techniques (Student Peer Mentor Training Workbook, UWS, 2003). Students also participate in interactive sessions on their roles and responsibilities as mentors (eg maintaining confidentiality and ethical behaviour); group dynamics; avoidance of conflict. The aim is for trainee mentors to gain understanding and appreciation of how to form a supportive, trusting and collaborative group.

An important component of the second day of training is for each trainee mentor to conduct a short mentoring session. They practise in small groups with their fellow trainees. Each group has a mentor, several mentees and an observer who takes note of the trainee mentor's performance. At the end of each practice session, the group debriefs the trainee providing feedback and support. Trainee mentors also have the opportunity to observe several other trainees' sessions which may enhance their insight of their own performance. On the second day, the students also meet with the subject lecturers who go on to become their contact lecturers (Contact Lecturers' Manual, UWS, 2002). Students and lecturers discuss issues such as promotion & planning for their sessions, supervision and other logistics specific to their subject.

Benefits of peer mentoring

There are many benefits to involvement in peer mentoring, for both the mentors and the mentees, for local and international students. Their student lives; their evolving professional skills; their cognitive, affective, social and cultural functioning all stand to benefit from participation in mentoring. Mentors at UWS have reported (Armstrong, 2003) improved communication techniques, negotiation and leadership skills, enhanced feelings of self worth and a positive sense of achievement. During a debriefing of mentors in May 2004, one mentor explained the benefits she had gained as follows: 'Running peer mentoring allowed me to gain better communication skills. It built my confidence and preparation skills. I was able to meet deadlines. I was not sure if I could do this. I was glad to be able to help students – I know they gained a lot' (Pastore, 2004). Mentees at UWS report (Armstrong, 2003; Carmichael, 2001) the development of better study skills such as time management and studying for exams; independent management of difficult subjects; feeling socially connected to the university and feeling emotionally supported. For international students, all these benefits would assist in making a successful transition to the Australian university culture.

Cognitive benefits of peer mentoring

Peer mentoring offers the opportunity for mentees and mentors to acquire cognitive skills that can help them progress academically (Martin & Arendale, 1993). One of the great strengths of peer mentoring is that its design facilitates the acquisition of cognitive skills in a number of ways, thus increasing the likelihood of students finding a way to learn which suits them as individuals.

Peer mentoring provides a socio-cultural setting for the mentees which structures and facilitates peer interactions designed to accomplish goal-directed outcomes, in accordance with the use of Vygotsky's approach to the development of skills and understandings (Vygotsky, cited in Tudge, 1990, p.157). Thus, the mentee is positively involved socially, emotionally and cognitively in behaviours designed to achieve particular academic outcomes by the group. As reported by a mentor in the UWS program, 'You're introducing everyone to each other, so you're encouraging friendships. You're also supporting the person in studying and coursework. You can always encourage them to investigate the other avenues that are there, that they're not sure of, such as use of computers, the library, and speaking to the academics.' (M7, 1999 cited in Armstrong, 2003, p.97). The benefits of such a holistic approach to learning is supported by those reporting on the first year experience (Tinto, 1995b; McInnis, 2001), as explained earlier. These types of programs have the potential to address the particular needs of international students as the social and emotional challenges pose the greatest barrier to the acquisition of cognitive skills in a 'foreign' university context.

The structured interactions which can occur in peer mentoring include mentee-mentor and mentee-mentee interactions. As reported by a mentor (M3, 2000) when interviewed by Armstrong, (2003) 'I found that if I couldn't answer any of their questions, there were other people in the group that because of their experiences they could help them, so they were helping each other and not just us helping them' (p. 106). The use of more expert to less expert pairings and the pattern of starting from the mentees questions and abilities provide the opportunity for scaffolding of mentees learning through the mentee's zone of proximal development towards a more expert level of performance (Vygotsky, cited in Tudge, 1990, p.157). The cognitive conflict, which can occur as mentees face these challenges, can motivate them to re-evaluate their cognitive strategies (Tudge, 1990, p.159). For international students, whose past learning experiences have often emphasised a range of cognitive strategies different to those emphasised in Australian universities, this provides an adjustment opportunity within a supportive, non-threatening environment. In the absence of opportunities like these, students can only measure the success of their cognitive approaches in the results they achieve in their assessment tasks, as evidenced by one UWS mentor's comments, 'It was basically instinct. Things that I thought I should have known in the first year of uni, and I didn't. Experiences that I have gone through without anyone telling me – this is what you should have done, so things that I've made mistakes on and I've suffered for, I told them straight away' (M2, 1999, cited in Armstrong, 2003, p. 94).

The use of experienced, trained students as mentors provides mentees with the opportunity to learn through observation and modelling (Bandura, 1986). By observing the approaches to learning modelled by the mentor, mentees can acquire cognitive skills and new patterns of behaviour (Bandura, 1986). The rehearsal of such behaviours in the peer mentoring context, with the opportunity for the mentors to verbalise their thinking, provides some of the most powerful learning opportunities for the mentees. For international students, who have so much to adjust to in order to make a successful transition to the university as well as a foreign country, this can be a particularly efficient program to be involved in, in terms of their development and consolidation of culturally appropriate cognitive strategies.

Finally, metacognitive learning can take place in peer mentoring. 'Metacognition, or knowledge of one's own cognitive processes, guides the problem-solving process and improves the efficiency of this goal-directed behavior' (Davidson, Deuser & Sternberg, 1994, p. 206), as exemplified by one UWS mentor's comments 'The other big thing was – coming from the double degree- obviously the work you do for Law would be different from how you do it in Science. So for them it was, 'How do we write an essay without writing a report' (M5, 1999, cited in Armstrong, 2003, p.100). By comparing their own learning behaviours with those of others in the group and with the verbalisations about learning behaviours that occur in peer mentoring, mentees can improve their metacognitive abilities and so become better at identifying, selecting and applying appropriate learning strategies. This can improve not only their ability to perform in a western academic context, but it can also increase their belief in their abilities, leading to increased persistence in the face of academic challenges (Bandura, 1986).

This buffet of learning opportunities is not restricted to the mentees alone. In particular, the improvements in metacognition are a likely outcome for the mentors, whose training focuses on the recall and comparison of learning strategies used by the mentors in their own university experiences. The training package developed by UWS (Student Peer Mentor Training Workbook, UWS, 2002) emphasises the modelling of mentoring through facilitation of group processes, so that the mentors are learning, through observation and modelling, the techniques necessary to manage a group of people towards the execution of a shared goal. The emphasis on collaborative learning in both the training sessions and the peer mentoring sessions facilitates the positive outcomes of this approach to learning, when compared to either individual or competitive learning, as determined by Johnson (1980) in a meta-analysis of 108 studies comparing these approaches to learning. Finally, the non-judgemental, accepting approach to students' efforts and participation, as stressed in both the training and the mentoring sessions, provides the conditions identified by Rogers (1977) as necessary for growth and development of the individual.

Cognitive skills development does not occur in isolation. Rather learning is dependent on social and cultural support to scaffold its development.

Social and cultural benefits

First year students draw valuable social and cultural benefits from peer mentoring. For example, the Acculturation model of the first semester peer mentoring at UWS provides mentees with opportunities for networking, finding their way around the university and becoming familiar with the services available. In these sessions students receive social and academic acculturation that includes their sharing and debriefing and developing study strategies (Burnett, 1999). This acculturation support is vital for most students. Mentee comments such as 'I would not have stayed if I did not have these sessions' (Carmichael, 2000) highlight the level of support some students may require during their transition to university life.

No institute can impart knowledge and dispense wisdom in a social and cultural vacuum and no teaching occurs in a culturally neutral zone. Yet the social and cultural factors affecting teaching and learning often remain implicit, hence learning of various practices valued in particular schools is often a result of incidental learning. Higher education in fact is the initiation of students in various historically situated social practices (Gee, 1992) of different schools. However, the social practices the students need to master and the cultural requirements they need to fulfil are seldom taught in any formal or explicit form in their classes (Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003) leaving students uncertain about what is expected of them. One first year student has commented about the first few weeks of university when 'I was a lost student; did not know where to go' (Handa, 2003a). As learning of various practices specific to particular schools is often a product of incidental learning, the new students do need something beyond what they can learn in a lecture or from their textbooks. Therefore, to become members of their academic community students need time, support, and an interactive atmosphere in their school so this learning can take place. By adopting School wide peer mentoring programme, a channel of communication between senior and new students can be established. A satisfied mentee in the UWS program has commented, 'I attended mainly to clarify for me what was expected of me for my assessment tasks' (Carmichael, 2002).

Peer mentoring therefore contributes to building a safe, positive, learning environment where students explore the explicit as well as the implicit expectations within their field of study. During their mentoring sessions the new students do not only learn the specific requirements of their subject but they also get familiar with its discourse by participating in subject related discussions and various problem solving activities. The academic discourse according to Gee (1996) is way of using language, thinking as well as acting in a socially accepted manner that "can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group" (p. 131). Peer mentoring sessions give mentees a venue to learn and practise their new discipline specific language. Moreover having a practice forum can ease the anxiety of speaking out in lectures and tutorials which can be quite daunting for many new students.

A fairly recent development in Australian universities is the role that professional bodies (e.g. Accounting Bodies and Nurses' Registration Board) have in determining skills which will be acquired during an undergraduate program of study. One such valued skill is participation in group projects that often requires sophisticated negotiation skills and the ability to contribute to group discussion. Peer mentoring can provide non threatening and collaborative opportunities for students to practise 'group skills' by establishing 'active community partnerships' between mentors and mentees which can add a social dimension to learning which is often missing from today's universities (Anderson & Baud, 1996). Therefore in subjects where students are not pressured to participate in mandatory group programs, peer mentoring can be an experience of collegiality with the university population whereby students feel less isolated on their academic journey.

These socio-cultural benefits of mentoring are pertinent for international students especially students coming from 'a higher degree of cultural and/or linguistic enclosure' who may face 'significant barriers [in their] linguistic and academic adjustment' at university in Australia (Hathorne, 1999, p. 57). They need to develop not only an understanding of the social and cultural aspect of their university learning but may also need to develop 'disciplinary literacy' in their second language (Riazi, 1997, p. 39) to participate fully in their student life. It is of great benefit for these international students to participate in peer mentoring. For example mentoring sessions can help them form meaningful 'learning partnerships with local ESB class fellows', (Handa, 2003b, p. 42). Their interaction with their peers can enhance their adjustments 'to the lingual as well as the social milieu' (Braine, 2002, p. 60) of their institute. Moreover as most of them 'lack interactive relationships inside or outside their classrooms' (Handa, 2003b, p. 42) peer mentoring can help them go through 'an interactive social-cognitive process' (Riazi, 1997, cited in Handa, 2003b, p. 42) to make

a successful adjustment at university as well as at work. For example in one of the Nursing subjects at UWS, the mentoring sessions are benefiting international students by providing them with opportunities to work with local students as their mentors. The peer mentors help these international students develop communication skill as in their mentoring sessions the students not only learn and practise their subject related vernacular but also improve their understanding and usage of Australian colloquial expressions and phrases. All this can boost their morale and arm them with confidence when they go to their clinic placements.

However, these socio-cultural benefits are not restricted to the mentee experience. Mentors too experience deeper learning when they go through the real situations of working in teams and develop an understanding and an appreciation of 'group dynamics, management and leadership qualities' (Daruwalla & Knowd, 2004) Mentors working with international students also gain valuable intercultural skills. Therefore peer mentoring provides mentors with opportunities to enhance and demonstrate their acquisition of various graduate attributes on which they are assessed prior to graduation. Many former mentors have been documented as reporting that the skills developed during mentoring were proved beneficial later in their career in impressing their employers (Meikle, 1993) with their communication skills.

While social and cultural factors are recognised as supporting cognitive learning, of no lesser importance are the affective factors which can support or hinder learning.

Affective benefits of Peer Mentoring

The affective factors related to the first year experience of study at University are numerous. Frequent themes which have emerged from evaluations and focus groups conducted at UWS include the feeling of 'being supported' and a sense of a growing 'self confidence' in attaining academic success. However other students report an overwhelming sense of confusion (Carmichael, 2001; Power & Carmichael, 2003). These findings are consistent with the findings of other studies undertaken both within Australia (Beasley, 1997; Clulow, 1999) and overseas (Martin & Arendale, 1993; Pauk, 1993; Ashwin, 1994).

Feeling 'supported' seems to be an overarching term used by students to describe emotional support (encouragement to continue) as well as academic support (information sharing) and personal support (friendship) (Carmichael, 2001; Clulow, 1999). Feeling supported seems to empower students to achieve goals that they perceive impossible to achieve on their own. This view was expressed by one mentee at UWS 'I believe that I would not have stayed at uni if this program was not available' (Power & Carmichael, 2003). Research undertaken by Beasley at Murdoch University (2003, p.9) also reports similar findings 'the support network of friends that I made... has helped me to settle in and feel like I "belong" in the environment'.

It is commonly reported by students that they begin a semester with feelings of apprehension and doubt about their ability to succeed in a particular subject. Usually such negative feelings soon dissipate. However in units of study which have a high failure or a high drop out rate, student unease may continue to diminish students' chances of success. It is in complex learning situations such as these that peer mentoring can support students and encourage their perseverance.

Gaining confidence (Carmichael, 2002; Clulow, 1999; Martin & Arendale, 1993) is an another important affective outcome of mentoring programmes. Confidence can be said to be the growing feelings of control and of 'self belief regarding one's ability to perform a task' (Shoobridge, n.d.). While self confidence is essentially an intrinsic quality, Beasley (1997) reports on some external observable manifestations of confidence: when students become 'more vocal, less hesitant, and less dependent on the mentor' (p.7). Mentees themselves commented on a growing sense of confidence as a result of attending mentoring sessions. Students felt confident in relation to 'their thinking, [and] in their ability to participate in tutorials and their preparedness for exams' (Beasley, 1997, p.10). A mentee at UWS reported that she felt more confident asking questions within a small collaborative group than approaching a figure of authority. 'I found it easier to bring my questions, concerns and problems to the mentor and group, than to approach the lecturer etc.' (Carmichael, 2002). Another mentee at UWS similarly described their experience claiming: mentoring 'enhanced my learning... until I became confident to do the work on my own' (Power & Carmichael, 2003). These outcomes are consistent with the results of an extensive research project

undertaken in 1993 by Martin and Arendale in the US which also demonstrated that control over content material produces increased self confidence (Martin & Arendale, 1994).

This self reporting of improved self confidence among mentees is acknowledged by mentors in Beasley's (1997) study who reported recognising new behaviours in the students they were mentoring - students became 'more confident in approaching their mainstream tutors and lecturers for help and more confident in participating in tutorials' (p.7). Peer mentoring not only advantages the mentees in achieving higher levels of self confidence, mentors too, report gaining 'considerable confidence' themselves in interacting with others for sustained periods of time over many weeks (Carmichael, 2001, p. 2). In Beasley's research (1997) some mentors claim 'an increase in their own confidence, an improvement in their communication skills and a greater sense of self worth from doing something meaningful for someone else' (p.8).

While lack of self confidence can afflict any student, our international students are likely to be more susceptible to reduced confidence because of the new and unfamiliar environment they find themselves in. As mentioned previously, peer mentoring in one of the Nursing subjects at UWS, is evidence that peer mentoring can offer a supportive environment for international students while they explore and come to understand 'new ways of doing, new ways of being' within both the wider cultural context and the university culture in particular; and if necessary offers opportunity to explore the linguistic demands related to their study as well as their work.

As an international student Handa (2003b) discusses her own experiences as a university student in Australia and meeting the challenges associated with learning in an unfamiliar cultural setting. She describes 'feeling awkward' when attempting to participate in group discussion. She argues that the 'culture specific' nature of group discussion makes it difficult for someone coming from a different culture and educational system to adjust to its requirements. She suggests that it 'takes time and sufficient exposure to the new environment for students to gain confidence... to contribute to their classroom discussions' (p. 39). Peer mentoring offers a safe and supportive environment for international students to acclimatize to their unfamiliar academic environment.

Feelings of confusion are frequently reported by new students in particular. Students often find they cannot verbalise the problem they are facing in a particular subject. There will be many reasons for this inability to articulate the problem. Sometimes it is because students are new to the area of study and are yet to grasp the central concept (Pauk, 1993). It may be that the pace of the class too fast (Ashwin 1994) or that students have forgotten previous learning which may impact on their current learning. One mentor has commented saying: 'often students feel so confused that they can not verbalise what their particular lack of understanding is about' (Ashwin, 1994, p.3). A sense of confusion can also be compounded when students find it difficult to ask questions in lectures since the lecture theatre is 'too public' (Ashwin, 1994); or when students feel too vulnerable to ask questions of lecturers and tutors, those who assess their work (Arendale, 1994, p.2). The experience of feeling confused is an often reported reason for attending peer mentoring. Whatever the reason for the confusion, peer mentoring allows students opportunity and time to unravel the common or individual problems they are facing.

Conclusion

The cognitive benefits of peer mentoring for all students, and in particular for international students are closely linked to the socio-cultural context in which the learning takes place. As a supportive program, it is especially beneficial for international students who have opportunities to develop and practise additional skills such as group participation, negotiation and leadership qualities. This supportive context in turn, encourages appropriate socio-cultural, affective adjustments to the university. The experience of mentoring and of being mentored develops a sense of collegiality among students who consequently feel more positive about their learning. They also feel a sense of 'connection' to the university community. For the program to run successfully there is a need for cooperation between academic and training staff as well as cooperation between groups of students. This cooperative and collaborative ethos of the program positively affects the climate of the overall university (Shores & Tiernan, 1996).

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